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ABSTRACT

Three speeches given by prominent authors at regional workshops sponsored by the Joint Liaison Committee of the Association for Childhood Education International and the Children's Book Council are printed here. The author--Lloyd Alexander, Myra Cohn Livingston, and Virginia Hamilton--addressed the subject of "Literature, Creativity and Imagination," stressing the importance of imagination in introducing literature to children. Each of the speeches includes a short bibliography. (RB)

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Literature, Creativity and Imagination

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Preface: Dropping a Little Magic

As a member of the Joint Liaison Committee of the Association for Childhood Education International and the Children's Book Council I take pleasure in introducing three speeches of prominent authors printed here from our regional workshops. Each author—Lloyd Alexander, Myra Cohn Livingston and Virginia Hamilton—spoke to the same subject—*Literature, Creativity and Imagination*. In my opinion, the most important of these is *Imagination*. Without it we would not have creativity or, eventually, literature. Using the imagination is the most important experience a teacher can make possible for a child.

Many of today's children are coming to their first day of school without ever having had a story read to them or without having been given a book of their very own to hold. We have all experienced that wonderful glow as we see their imagination being kindled by a good book. "Did it really happen?" "I want to meet those animals." "Read another one!" One forgets that at the same time we stimulate their imaginations we are leading them to creativity and literature.

Many of today's teachers were "turned off" poetry by *their* teachers. Therefore, some children unfortunately go straight from Mother Goose to the classics without having the in-between steps such as Myra Cohn Livingston's collections to help them understand the world of the poets. Those pauses for poetry are important steps where the imagination catches fire. One sometimes forgets that the easy, interestingly written science book stimulates the mind. Certainly a scientist had to have the dream and the imagination, before the skilled human accomplishment. From it came the creativity and literature. Somewhere along the line we became afraid to use our imaginations. I have heard some teachers and librarians say, "Fairy tales are dead. Who reads fantasy any more?"

Yet fairy tales are more than elves, gnomes or giants. They are an expansion of interest and concepts, a widening of ideas, an understanding of people, places and events. Equally important, they help children understand themselves. Fairy tales and fantasy such as Lloyd Alexander's books are Mirrors of the Human Condition relating the emotions, and they know no age limit. Don't the people in fairy tales behave the same as people in real life? Some are very good, some are very bad. Some are kind, others are cruel. Some are strong, some are weak. Some go traveling, others stay home. They are also a bridge from unreality to reality and reality to unreality—taking one from one location to another. All of us must have a vicarious escape once in a while, for through these experiences one grows. We learn that the facts of existence always manage to win out, sometimes with the help of a little magic. To me, that magic is imagination.

I have told stories to over a million children, and one can't help but become blase. Yet, years later, children who have heard me tell me what the experience did for them. Somewhere along the line I dropped a little magic. It is hoped that these speeches will give you some additional magic that will lead your children and those entrusted to you to *Imagination, Creativity and Literature*.

Beman Lord
Charles Scribner's Sons

Literature, Creativity and Imagination

On October 17, 1970, a signal event occurred in New York City: the first regional workshop sponsored by a recently formed Joint Liaison Committee of the Association for Childhood Education International and the Children's Book Council.

Co-chairmen Eleanor Burts (ACEI) and Sophie Silberberg (CBC) presided at the one-day conference on "Children Today and Books," which featured three major speakers and eight work groups. In attendance in the Mills College auditorium was an enthusiastic audience of teachers, students, authors, illustrators, editors, publishers and librarians.

Committee member Claudia Lewis, of Bank Street College of Education, introduced the program. In an opening statement she spoke of literature as a vital resource to help children grow, to find their own true directions. "What can happen," she asked the panel of speakers, "when a book and a child come face to face?"

Eloquent answers came from authors Milton Meltzer, who spoke on "Literature and Social Consciousness," and Roma Gans, the Eternal Teacher, who spoke on "Literature and Personal Awareness." Mr. Meltzer, co-author with Langston Hughes of A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF THE NEGRO IN AMERICA *and later Hughes' biographer, analyzed in detail his own biography of Lydia Maria Child. Roma Gans described "the pressures of the overlying layers" that impinge on a child's consciousness and offered many anecdotal instances of ways literature touches the mainsprings of his feelings.*

We are pleased to present in full the remarks of the third featured speaker, Newbery Award winner Lloyd Alexander.

Lloyd Alexander

POETRY AND JUSTICE, either separately or in combination, have always been highly valued, no doubt because of their scarcity. These days are no exception; but every so often I detect an element of poetic justice at work, most recently in my own case. Poetic justice—or the irony of fate. This summer I rashly agreed to conduct a course in children's literature.

When I was a boy I flunked *Treasure Island*. I had read the book at home and loved it and still do. But at school—that was something else again. And the exam question that caused my downfall dealt with that blockhouse—how it was built, where the gates were, or something equally profound, and for the life of me I couldn't remember. That was only one small skirmish in the guerilla warfare of my school days. Enoch Arden and I never did get to be friends. Sir Launfal—his famous vision, as far as I was concerned, was a bad trip (though we didn't have that phrase in my day). So, when I ended up as a writer, instead of following certain other pathways predicted for me, I don't know who was more surprised: my teachers or their reluctant student. They'd have been even more astonished seeing me in front of a classroom instead of skulking in the back.

In all honesty I now have to look back on those teachers with belated admiration. I've learned something every teacher knows much better than I do: teaching is unbelievably hard work. When I think how much energy, effort, thought, planning, and leg muscles are demanded even of the modestly average instructor, I admit my teachers weren't so bad after all. Even in those days, I suppose they were asking themselves the same question that came up time and again during my own course, "How to stimulate creativity and imagination?" Or, as we in the academic profession like to put it, "How do we turn the kids on?"

My students and I looked hard for the answer. We never did find it. Perhaps the question isn't susceptible to a single, general answer. In some ways, it's rather like asking, "How do you fall in love?" or "How do you write a book?" (the two are not unrelated). Perhaps the question isn't, "How do we turn kids on?" but, "How do we not turn them off?" Charles Reasoner implies this idea very aptly in the title of one of his books, *Releasing Children to Literature*.[1] Because, at a certain stage, children already are turned on. They have an openness of imagination, an openness to imagination. When it's somehow stifled, in school or at home, the problem grows all the harder. Richard Lewis, compiler of the anthology *Miracles*,[2] tries to solve it through what he calls "unwinding"—but he warns it's a process that takes place under difficult and delicate conditions.

In the best of circumstances, it demands an enormous amount of patience, effort and insight and isn't guaranteed to be always successful. If I emphasize the difficulties, it's because I don't want to minimize them. I'm aware of the difference between theory and practice, how easy it is for a writer to talk about how things should be and how hard it is to apply them in one's daily work.

Don Quixote mistook windmills for wicked monsters. Admitting that writers tend to be somewhat quixotic characters, I don't think anyone wants to make the error of mistaking real monsters for windmills. The monstrosities of war, poverty and injustice are not figments of a hyperactive imagination; they aren't metaphysical propositions for abstract discourse. Neither are apathy, indifference or despair. They are all too real, all too current among young people and adults as well, not only in the inner-city ghettos but in the pastoral prefabs of outer suburbia. Developing or restoring imagination is not an imaginary problem.

So I'd rather go at the subject not so much on the basis of esthetics, but in the most practical, realistic sense. Literature is not a luxury. Creativity and imagination are not ornaments or cultural status symbols, but essential to the human personality. We use the term "enrichment," but I don't interpret this word as merely the addition of a little extra something—like breakfast food manufacturers sprinkling in an alphabet of vitamins to make up for a basic lack of quality. Enrichment—yes, of course; but enrichment as a fundamental part of the educational process.

Creativity and imagination are inseparable from social consciousness and personal awareness. In the broadest sense, I don't think they can function without each other. Imagination isn't an isolated phenomenon; it grows from the deepest roots of the human organism. It not only involves and encompasses personal and social awareness, but is a part of our whole biological economy. When it fails to grow, or grows stunted, we can get very sick. More than a figure of speech, saying we can't live without imagination may well be the most literal, scientific fact.

One clue comes from recent investigations into the nature of sleep. Researchers observed the rapid eye movements of sleeping subjects to learn when they were dreaming and when they were merely sleeping without much neural activity going on in the brain. The experimenters were able to wake their groggy subjects at certain moments and keep them from dreaming. They found that even with adequate hours of sleep, the interruption of those dream periods—dream-deprivation, in effect—resulted, in a relatively short time, in serious emotional and physical disorders.

[1] Charles Reasoner, *Releasing Children to Literature* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968).

[2] Richard Lewis, *Miracles: Poems by Children of the English-Speaking World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966).

We can make a close analogy between the unstructured imagination we call dream and the waking dream we call art. Deprived of art that stimulates and strengthens our conscious imaginations, we can end up suffering from an acute case of psychic malnutrition. The result, at the very least, is a kind of one-dimensional personality, a shallowness of spirit, in the individual or in society itself.

The long-range effects are still worse. When imagination fails, compassion and humaneness dwindle and atrophy along with it. Unleavened by imagination, the variety and richness of life turn into flat abstractions; people become objects to be manipulated—with the social consequences we know all too well.

So, instead of seeing art as mere amusement, as an escape from life, I see it as one of the most practical, available means for letting us reach into life. The imaginative experience of literature is considerably more than a kind of legal freakout, or an indulgence we occasionally allow ourselves when we have nothing better to do. It's one of the ways of gaining an active awareness of ourselves as individuals, an awareness of our society —and perhaps an encouragement to make it better.

I'm not minimizing the idea of art for art's sake. Art needs no excuse for its existence any more than the organic life processes need an excuse for their existence. One trap that educators—and artists themselves—can easily fall into is considering works of art as educational materials, as means only to some other end. That's something like reducing King Lear to a case-history in geriatrics; or seeing the whole of world literature as a cram-course in bibliotherapy.

Yet, in a special and subtle way, art is a means to an end: the end being a complete human, sensitive to the world he lives in, to himself, and to all who live in the world with him.

In some art forms—painting, very often; music to some extent—the means are nonverbal, primarily sensuous. Some types of literature work in a similar way: the sheer exuberance of playing with language, with acoustics, with images, with pure fancy and fantasy. But literature can also include a deeper element in addition to what's happening on the surface. Sometimes very obvious, sometimes very subtle, but seldom nonexistent. Call it the writer's viewpoint or attitude, his own personal vision he conveys in his work. In his article, "Emotions and Creativity" (*Psychology Today*, August 1970), Pavel Simonov writes:

"A work of art is a model of the artist's attitude toward a phenomenon. Even when an artist depicts something horrible, he can appraise it as horrible only because he has a positive ideal for comparison."[3]

Certainly this is true of literature. Attitude and viewpoint are basically what give each great book its own unique, unmistakable tone and flavor: the very essence of the book. As the author John Fowles says, "A great work of prose fiction remains a totally untranslatable esthetic and moral experience."

Untranslatable, but not untransmittable. In the best of literature, the reader becomes almost a part of the creative process. Reading a poem he becomes, in effect; the poet. In a novel he is not only the characters; he is, in a sense, the novelist. He gains not only the specific pleasure of the story and characters, the vicarious experience of living through the events; he gains the added experience of seeing it all as the author himself did. With each book, the reader continually adds new facets to his personality. As the saying goes, we are what we eat. To some degree, we are also what we read.

But the creative experience of literature happens to us only if we want it to. Now comes up the question—about which I've been stalling as long as possible because I don't know the answer —how can we make it happen?

Well, we do know for sure we can't *make* it happen. *Letting* it happen is better, in a climate where the discovery of literature *can* happen; where art is a natural part of everyday life; where the masterpieces of literature, painting or music aren't approached with genuflections or hushed reverence, as if they were so many age-brittle

[3] Reprinted from *Psychology Today* August 1970. Copyright © Communications/Research/Machines, Inc.

mummies, but as vital human experiences, as fresh and alive as when they were first created.

One key—though by no means a skeleton key that opens every lock—is, first, to develop and sharpen our own understanding and awareness. We aren't in much of a position to encourage imagination and creativity unless we're able to experience it ourselves. I'm not suggesting a crash program in painting-by-the-numbers or a quickie correspondence course with the Famous Writers Institute or whatever. What I'm getting at is simpler, though perhaps harder: that we, as human beings, be open to life; that we see, hear, touch with the same awareness we hope to foster in young people.

There are no formulas for this. We have to find our personal recipes. But we can't expect to transmit imagination unless we have it ourselves. We can't buy it prepackaged like Instant Breakfast.

Available are dozens of first-rate methodologies, programs, devices—excellent, carefully planned, well thought out. But ultimately they depend on the individual using them. Believe me, in my classroom I was very grateful for all the audio-visual first aids I could get. They were useful, enjoyable, effective—and they gave me a chance to rest my throbbing vocal cords. But at the end, I realized a teacher must be more than a competent film-projectionist. I don't think there's anything more stimulating than the impact of one live, full-color, 3D personality on another. I think it was Mark Hopkins who defined education as a teacher sitting on one end of a log and a student on the other. The student end of the log is getting desperately overcrowded, the teacher end is pretty well overstrained and hassled. But the relationship stays the same. We have substitute teachers but, as yet, no substitute *for* teachers.

If I'm suggesting the need for personal effort in self-development, I'm also suggesting it isn't easy. I was reading an article about tape recordings of the sound produced by Alpha waves in the brain. They're supposed to plunge the listener into deep meditation followed, presumably, by stereophonic satori. I haven't heard the tapes, but if I thought they'd help I'd be first in line to buy a set.

I'm afraid, though, enlightenment isn't all that conveniently come by. We've been trying for several millennia, and still haven't solved the elementary problem of man's inhumanity to man. In that area, we haven't gone much beyond our neolithic forebears. But that's no reason to keep from trying.

I think we recognize that we can't transform all America's fifth-graders into junior Mozarts and Shakespeares. What we can do, modestly perhaps but quite realistically, is to help them grow a little in compassion and understanding. We can do it, however, only to the extent that we ourselves grow. It's worth the effort. Because what we can create in children is that fine balance between emotion and intellect, where each is informed with the other—which is true intelligence, one of the most beautiful of all human qualities. And the most hopeful.

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Literature, Creativity and Imagination

Myra Cohn Livingston

More happy news for children's litterateurs!

On November 20, 1971, a day-long conference was held at San Fernando Valley State College in Northridge, California, sponsored by the Southern California Association for Childhood Education in conjunction with the Children's Book Council. Speakers were the celebrated authors Myra Cohn Livingston, Scott O'Dell, Ellen Raskin and Eleanor Cameron. Following the morning presentation the registrants divided into workshop groups to discuss implications for their own work. Dorothy McKenzie of Los Angeles State College and the University of California, Los Angeles, moderated a summary session.

This meeting was the second in a series of regional conferences instituted by a Joint Liaison Committee of the Association for Childhood Education International and the Children's Book Council (co-chairmen are Eleanor Burts for ACEI and Velma Varner for CBC).

In the March 1971 issue of CHILDHOOD EDUCATION *we presented the remarks of Newbery Award winner Lloyd Alexander, who spoke on "Literature, Creativity and Imagination" at the first regional workshop, held in New York City on October 17, 1970. We are grateful to offer now the presentation on the same topic made in Northridge by Mrs. Livingston.*

Myra Cohn Livingston, who lives in Beverly Hills, California, has a long list of outstanding books to her credit. Her three most recent are A Tune Beyond Us *(1968),* A Crazy Flight and Other Poems *(1969), and* Speak Roughly to Your Little Boy *(1971)—all published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. The first and last she edited; the middle selection is her own poetry.*

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Illustration from A TUNE BEYOND US by James J. Spanfeller. Copyright © 1968 by Myra Cohn Livingston. Illustrations © 1968 by Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. Used with permission.

OF ALL THE INVENTIONS dreamed up by man, none seems more pertinent to the topic of "Literature, Creativity and Imagination" than those remarkable devices fashioned by the White Knight in *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There.*

You may remember them—a queer shaped little deal box, in which to keep clothes and sandwiches, hung by a harness across the shoulders, and carried upside down so that the rain should not get in, discovered by Alice, curiously enough, with the lid wide open and the contents lost; another box, a mousetrap, fastened to the horse's saddle, in the event that any mice should happen to scamper up onto the horse; and anklets for the horse's feet "to guard against the bite of sharks." The list goes on—but the point, it seems to me, is quite evident. It is easy to laugh at the bungling White Knight, always tumbling off his horse "first on one side and then on the other"; but should we, on reading or remembering, label his inventions as sheer nonsense?

Lewis Carroll was a man who used nonsense as a very special tool; his humor essentially turned logic upside down much as the White Knight, himself, thought better when falling, head downwards, from his horse. "Nonsense," writes Phyllis Greenacre (1955, p. 271), one of Carroll's biographers, "is not only the lack of reason or expected order, but it is the defiance of reason which men value most, and it is achieved by apparent isolation, inconsequence, and generally heedless disconnection. There is a quality of (generally quiet) explosive destructiveness about sheer nonsense —an unannounced nihilism—which is never absolutely achieved to be sure, but is felt in its subtle implications."

Would it be rash to suggest, in speaking of creativity and imagination through literature, that these inventions, on closer examination, are not so nonsensical as first they seem? "To be funny," George Orwell wrote, "you have to be serious." And Lewis Carroll, the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was intensely serious about matters of the imagination, including the White Knight and his unusual inventions. It is to be wondered, rather, if we, living in an environment that pays lip service to the importance of imagination and creativity, are not the ones who may well seem nonsensical.

Let us start with the box which the White Knight kept harnessed about his shoulders, close to the face and hands so that food and clothing were easily available. Symbolic, certainly, of the physical needs by which the human body is sustained, protected by being carried upside down so that the elements do not spoil these essentials for very life. Perhaps you will remember the Knight's reaction when Alice discovers the lid is unhinged and the contents scattered; immediately he hangs the empty box upon the branch of a tree, "in hopes some bees may make a nest in it—then I should get the honey."

THE "BOX" OF LITERATURE

Should you be able to accept my own thesis, that what Lewis Carroll did throughout his Alice books was to substitute, time and again, actual food for the body and the stomach for what we call "food for thought" or "food for

the mind" (much as Maurice Sendak has, in a sense, more recently done), you will be able to envision that within this box of "food for thought" is that which we call literature, those words and ideas of permanent and universal interest that sustain the mind and emotion of both adult and child. Do we not keep this literature close to our heads, our eyes and our hands, that we may easily pick up the books that enclose the words?

We know that in this literature is the power to stimulate, to strengthen the imaginations of our young people, to arouse curiosity, to develop creativity; and yet do we offer it, *really* offer it, at all? Indeed we categorize it, label it, make lists of it; our minds have logically arranged all this, and we have even built larger boxes called libraries. But what we have often failed to do is to recognize that the mind and logic do not, in themselves, assure successful use of the books, the words. "The mind alone cannot make sense of images," Archibald MacLeish tells us of poetry, "but emotions can—feelings can."

I am suggesting that we have become so consumed with the technicalities of the literature we offer that we often fail to read, really read the text, to understand with our hearts what it is saying. We have obliterated entire areas of exploration and substituted, when we speak of originality and creativity, mass-produced feelings and responses. Worse still, we have mistaken the tools and techniques, the forms, those things that should serve as the utensils and dishes for serving the food, the books, for the food itself. We have shied away from developing original thought and stretching the imagination; we have been fearful of emotions, of feelings; and the result is masses of so-called creativity writing done by our children without the slightest glimmer of real creation.

THE BAT AND THE MOCKINGBIRD

In Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet*, you will remember that the bat admires the songs of the mockingbird. The mockingbird has consented to listen to a poem which the bat has written about an owl who almost killed him. The bat eagerly awaits the mockingbird's response to the poem.

"Why, I like it," said the mockingbird.* "Techni-

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Ill. by Maurice Sendak. From *The Bat-Poet*, by Randall Jarrell. Copyright © The Macmillan Company 1963, 1964. Used by permission of the publisher.

The ear that listens to the owl believes

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THE CHILD AS MOCKINGBIRD

How many mockingbirds fail to be scared—to sense the force that elicits emotion and imagination? How many teachers, so concerned with the rhyme-scheme, the rhythm, accept these tools as substitutes for the meaning? How many little bats, how many children, must keep their poems and flights of imagination to themselves, because there is a mockingbird so puffed up with his own song, his own dictates, that the real stuff of creation never gets through? I am reminded of any number of articles written by well-meaning teachers who pay lip service to the idea that poetry is made up of all the elements of life, yet who painstakingly elaborate on "themes" (nature, picnics, pets, holidays) which they feel "suitable" for poetry. Heaven forbid that their students should venture off into realms that depart from the teacher's prescribed ideas of "Beauty" and "Truth"!

How many teachers have taken to their hearts a volume of children's poems called *Miracles*? It is very pleasant to read, for the beauties of nature are extolled on every page; it is what adults want to hear. But in how many other children do there burn other more important, urgent things to feel and say? How many have seized upon the haiku, with its apt nature symbols, as a sop for counting out seventeen syllables (which is only a little better than an exercise in mathematics), never concerned with the meaning of the word hokku, or "beginning phrase" which is the essence of the poem? How many more have recently set the children to busily turning out cinquains, another syllable-counting exercise? How many have overworked Mary O'Neill's *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* as a countless exercise in having children write out red is a fire engine, blue is the ocean, green is the tree, ad infinitum? How many have spent endless hours praising such drivel as "The cat ate the fat bat and slept in a hat and that was that"?

None of this is creativity and imagination. It is but a mass-produced easy way out; and it concentrates on the form, the techniques, rather than on the force that burns in the child's mind and imagination and will never, at this rate, find a way to express itself.

Creativity and imagination are not built and fostered by these gimmicks. It is emotion and feelings that release creativity. To encourage in our children these qualities requires the sort of commitment made by an individual teacher who is willing to dip into the box and ferret out that which may be meaningful to each individual child. It is made by encouraging different varieties of expression, by the recognition that each child will approach that which he reads differently; it is built by the trust between child and teacher that nothing is alien to the emotions and imagination and that the child will not be turned away because he has written something "unsuitable" in the teacher's judgment.

For one child, who like the little bat is born with the acute sensitivity that separates him

from his peers, it may be Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet;* for this book will say to him that he is different, that such sensitivities do often alienate one in the beginning and such a person is inclined to be dubious and doubtful about the technicalities.

For another, it may be such a book as Maurice Sendak's *Higgledy Piggledy Pop,* for the child may well put himself into the role of the dog, Jennie, bored by material comforts, alienated by immaturity and lack of experience, yearning to become a Leading Lady, and plunging, therefore, into the perils of the world and Castle Yonder. Yet, for another, it may be the very real story of Micuçú, in Elizabeth Bishop's *Ballad of the Burglar of Babylon,* running from the police, a man alienated because he has flaunted the rules of society.

Without dwelling on the various aspects of personal and social awareness within these books, I would only point out that there is, in all three, the potential for identification. The bat, the dog, the man all wish to be part of their world; yet each is alienated, each faces the fears of his society—a bat-eating owl, a lion and a gun. Is it the mind alone—reason, logic—or is it creativity and imagination that make the bat turn his fear of death into a poem, that inspire the words which Jennie uses to save Baby from the lion, and that cause Micuçú to settle for ninety hours on the hills of Babylon although his death is certain? For each the experience is different.

I should like to interject here that lack of experience, which we presume to be common to all children, just starting in life, is one of the most germinal factors one can think of for creativity and imagination. A young mind, unhampered by cliches, by staid and oftentimes outmoded rules, can put into new relationships the stuff of the world he sees about him. Yet how often is this fresh approach squelched; how often is his imagination made subservient to techniques, forms?

Let me add quickly that I am far from opposed to forms, to the proper training and use of the tools of the craft, but I feel they come second to the content, the meaning, the force. At the risk of repeating myself for the thousandth time, I should like to offer that one does not teach a child imagination or originality or how to write creatively. One only establishes the climate, the relationship with the world through literature, which helps a child develop his sensitivities and introduces him, gradually, to the forms and craft in which imagination will find expression. The trouble is, as I see it today, that too many are willing to accept the tools and techniques of creative writing for the real thing. They will dig no deeper than insisting a haiku has seventeen syllables—not fifteen, not nineteen—and making certain that cat rhymes with hat, and that whatever thoughts or words come in between be correctly spelled and legibly written on neatly lined paper.

What, then, if we discard the gimmicks and turn back to the box of literature? What, then, if we commit ourselves to the imagination of each individual child who enters our classroom or library? "It is," says George Steiner (1970, pp. 66-67), "a matter of seriousness and emotional risk, a recognition that the teaching of literature, if it can be done at all, is an extraordinarily complex and dangerous business, of knowing that one takes in hand the quick of another human being." "To teach literature," he continues, "as if it were some kind of urbane trade, of professional routine, is to do worse than teach badly. . . . To teach it as if the critical text were more important, more profitable than the poem, as if the examination syllabus mattered more than the adventure of private discovery, of passionate digression, is worst of all."

This possibility of private discovery, of passionate digression, is indeed within the box. This potential for arousing the imagination to

sense new relationships, to seize hold of them, to work creatively is assuredly there. And somehow, somehow, we must find new ways, new methods by which we may bring literature to our young people. For me, poetry, as the literature of heightened consciousness, is one way of touching the individual child, finding the poem that sings in the child's own rhythm, offering in Stephen Spender's words "an event individually experienced" but with the knowledge that "this uniqueness is the universal mode of experiencing all events. Poetry makes one realize that one is alone, and complex; and that to be alone is universal" (Spender, 1950, p. 101).

For you there will be hundreds of ways, based on your own feelings as to what a piece of literature strikes in you, as an individual, and therefore, hopefully, in the individual child. With this approach there can be no room for gimmickry and gimcracks, no mass-produced exercises in creative futility.

The White Knight, you see, had his own way. He turned the box upside down and left the lid open. What spilled along the way could be picked up by a passerby, and he could then hang the empty box on a tree so that it would be replenished by the bees with more "honey." Remember, too, the mousetrap box, perched upon the horse's saddle. It is, perhaps, unlikely that many mice will climb up a horse's leg; but on the off-chance that it might happen, there is always the cheese.

As for the anklets around the horse's feet, to ward off any sharks, perhaps we ought to claim them and wind them around our own ankles. It is not nonsensical to envision that we may have great need of them, for when we step into new waters we are likely to upset many a heretofore cherished notion about literature and creativity and imagination. This I can promise you.

Whenever the (Knight's) horse stopped (which it did very often) he fell off in front; and, whenever it went on again (which it generally did rather suddenly), he fell off behind. Otherwise, he kept on pretty well, except that he had a habit of now and then falling off sideways; and, as he generally did this on the side on which Alice was walking, she soon found that it was the best plan not to walk *quite* close to the horse.

"I'm afraid you've not had much practice in riding," she ventured to say, as she was helping him up from his fifth tumble.

The Knight looked very much surprised, and a little offended at the remark. "What makes you say that?" he asked, as he scrambled back into the saddle, keeping hold of Alice's hair with one hand, to save himself from falling over on the other side.

"Because people don't fall off quite so often, when they've had much practice."

"I've had plenty of practice," the Knight said very gravely: "plenty of practice!"

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See also:

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Literature, Creativity and Imagination

Date: November 11, 1972. Place: George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, Tennessee. Occasion: the third in a series of regional workshops sponsored by a Joint Liaison Committee of the Association for Childhood Education International and the Children's Book Council (co-chairpersons are Claudia Lewis for ACEI and Velma Varner for CBC). Over three hundred enthusiastic participants are jampacked in the Auditorium of the Demonstration School, seeking ways of "Widening Horizons Through Children's Books." Following introductions by local conference coordinator Imogene Forte, three celebrated authors speak. First comes Virginia Hamilton; then William Armstrong, Newbery Award winner for Sounder. *Roma Gans gives a delightful anecdotal luncheon address.*

Virginia Hamilton, who resides in Yellow Springs, Ohio, is herself a recent Newbery Award runner-up (for The Planet of Junior Brown). *Let's listen to her stirring personal account of "what literature and writing mean to me."*

VIRGINIA HAMILTON

I CAN ADMIT with certainty that as a writer, I was a late developer. To be more precise, I wasn't convinced that I would be a writer until about the age of twenty-five. First, having fled Academe, I became a singer in obscure nightclubs; then, an esoteric folk singer; and, after that, a guitarist for a modern dance ensemble. But all along—since the age of nine or ten—I *had* been writing. At age nine, I started The Notebook, which was an accumulation of mysteries my parents and other adults talked about—whispered-gossip couched in symbolic language so that my young ears would not comprehend. As I recall, I filled The Notebook with all manner of secrets, knowing that one day I would be old enough to understand what I had written down.

What a wealth of grown-up talk graced its pages. What monstrous, wonderful, snide and vindictive secrets!

I lost the thing. I mislaid it or merely forgot it in my enthusiasm in growing to ten. I have never found it. And I know not what lay stark and open within its pages.

By age eleven, I had turned grim with the loss and had started my first *Novel*. I called it that. I must have read some novels, although I have no idea what they were about or what were their titles. Nevertheless, I filled page after page with vehement prose under the hot summer sun while lying on a slant atop the burning tin roof of the hog barn.

I was a country child. Writing must come easily and early to country girls when they discover pencil and paper before they learn about horses. Since horses of my childhood were fitted to the plow and not the saddle, I never had much love for them. But I did discover boys at age twelve and found them sickening. By age fourteen, I found boys marvelously intriguing and ever more so; yet, by then, paper and pencil had established themselves as my most constant friends. Boys might come along, tease me, and go away, while *p* and *p* remained ever present.

THE WORRY, THE TROUBLE

I cannot remember when I gave up the pencil for my first Olivetti, and it would be boring to catalog the number of Olivettis I've conquered. The foregoing is merely an introduction to the subject of Literature, Creativity and Imagination. I am a creative person with a vivid imagination who, some say, occasion-

ally writes literature. Moreover, I am a grown woman who never quite recovered from the loss of a notebook, and who now writes books in order to rediscover a mislaid mystery.

That reason for writing is as good as any. But, of course, it isn't the whole truth. I also write because as a child, a youngster in my mother's enormous Perry clan, I was considered strange, even stranger than my father who was an outlander from Iowa and by definition eccentric.

For I was the one who wandered away from home for hours on end at age six and wandered home again a few seconds before the arrival of the local gendarme. I was the one who had nightmares and walked the house, the night road and the fields in her sleep. I was the worry, the trouble, the one with the unusual voice who would never perform for Sunday aunts and cousins.

In short, I was born to live within my mind, to have thoughts and dreams more vivid to me than any daylight. The wisest thing my family ever did was to realize early on that there was no changing me and to leave me alone. They left me to discover what I wanted and to learn what I could. In my whole life, I have been left alone to be what I wanted to be. No one ever objected to my writing things down. Teachers from grade school on through college only encouraged me. I can't recall anyone saying that being a writer was a stupid idea for a girl. Growing up in rural Ohio, with all sorts of possibilities for neglect, rejection, this encouragement was indeed very odd. I can only assume that I was lucky. I told people I was a writer. They would look at me quizzically for a long moment, then nod and believe.

So it is that if you say something long enough, you will be what you say you are. Now, I am a writer and by no manner of logic that I can discover.

ANOTHER PLANET

Twenty years ago, Francois Mauriac wrote these words in a French literary magazine:

> Every novelist ought to invent his own technique . . . Every novel worthy of the name is like another planet, whether large or small, which has its own laws just as it has its own flora and fauna. Thus, Faulkner's technique is certainly the best one with which to paint Faulkner's world; and Kafka's nightmare has produced its own myths that make it communicable.[1]

Mauriac's premise holds true as well for children's books. I hesitate to use the term "children's literature," for not only have we in the past narrowed our view of children but of literature, also, so that either view has become limited to individuals and their moment in time.

Today, happily, all manner of children's books are being written, reflecting on that which is provocative in our society. It is a grand time to be a novelist, rather scary, but a time full of challenge. Our real world has become so bizarre that a novelist must go very far to get beyond it. More and more, she must turn inward upon herself, searching for what she suspects is true: society may change, books and writers may change, but the essence of that which we call literature might possibly remain the same. A good novel may have its own laws; it may well be another planet, as Mauriac wrote.

When I write a book, I don't often ask myself about the kind of technique I am using, or who or what motivates the characters. For a time, I simply write it out, carried along by a strong sense of story unfolding with no limits on what the story can or cannot be. I never worry about why the story occurred to me at a particular time or why such a character came into existence. It is enough to know something of the plot in

[1] *La Table Ronde* (Aug. 1949).

order to continue. Therefore, I don't often think about Literature, Creativity and Imagination while I am working. I am content to let things develop, using all of the craft learned so painfully long ago—that myriad of technique and style which my instinct suggests is right. This is the way I began writing and it is still the way I write.

Not meaning to suggest that I write in any unconscious way, I believe there is an odd ability most writers have of dividing themselves into two entities. The first entity writes down the story as it occurs in a particular form; the second analyzes the worth of the story and form. It adds dimension and cuts away all that is unnecessary. Neither entity has anything to do with the initial act of creation. Of the books I have written, I am unable to tell how the initial act occurred. I never remember the first idea, the first thought, of any of them. That knowledge, like the long-lost Notebook, is mislaid and forgotten forever. No need to try to rediscover it, for I believe the loss is the way in which the mind protects its primordial dream.

The mind doesn't separate creativity from imagination. And both combined form the act of making sense and logic out of images stored in memory. Memory can be as new as the last minute and as old as childhood, past generations, all of the experience and history of experience one has ever learned. It is the Freudian Collective Unconscious and the Jungian Archaic Heritage; it is at times primordial and inexplicable. I rediscover what I can of memory and heighten it to new understanding through story, character, mood, technique and style.

Memory is what I have stored away, what did happen, what I think happened, what never happened but might have been great if it had, what I fear could have happened—on and on. It is the essence of my mental and physical exploration brought to bear on a specific idea I wish to write. Smell, sound, sight are all part of memory during this act of writing. And creative imagination plays an enormous role in how one uses them and how much of them one uses.

BENEVOLENT LIFE

The system of creating characters which either do or do not make a book come to life involves the energy of life that I, the writer, possess. That energy is like an unending stream. I dip into it for as much of it as I need for a given character. I may draw out of the stream an energy entirely unexpected, such as the sadness, the abject loneliness and mental isolation of Junior Brown. For the energy of life is not only a capacity for living, but also its opposite, the rejection of life.

Now, it occurs to me that *The Planet of Junior Brown* is a war between the capacity for living and the rejection of life. Both Miss Peebs and Junior Brown establish their fears as apparition, with no chance for communication for life in the real world. Mr. Pool and Buddy Clark allow the energy of life to flow into them from reality and from them into reality.

In all of my fiction, the characters win out for life. And life is a Benevolence which permits the characters to move and experience with utmost freedom.

Can you imagine what would have happened if life had not been good to Geeder Perry in *Zeely*—or if she hadn't had an Uncle there with a nice farm where they could visit?

Can you see what might have happened to Thomas Small in *The House of Dies Drear* if his father had not a chance for education, a job awaiting him in Ohio and a car to get the family there?

Benevolent Life is the one concession I make to wish-fulfillment. It is the single romance, the unreality, that I consciously allow myself. For in reality, life isn't so "good" for black families. It is never so sweet and so free.

Poet Nikki Giovanni wrote that, after having read *Zeely*, she sat in a closet and cried—"We remembered our childhood, long gone, never having been. . . . "We never had an Uncle Ross who lived on a farm in the country. We never knew a big, old house with the smell of generations of my people in it."[2] Thus, she cried for a childhood she wished she had had and for something lost she had never known.

That is the point of most of my writing, of course. I concede Benevolent Life to open the world to readers who never experienced the rare freedom I knew as a child. I concede it so that they will know that if my mind can conceive of freedom, so can theirs. I want them to wish for fulfillment while knowing that fulfillment is never easy.

Only in *The Planet of Junior Brown* do I depart from the concept of Benevolent Life as a certainty. The backdrop of the city with its hard-edged institutions is not friendly to Junior Brown or Buddy Clark. It is not unfriendly, either, but indifferent, which is the closest I have come to writing about real life. Thus, *Planet* is not a pretty book in the sense that *Zeely* might be called so. But it is an honest book and one that I am extremely proud of. I shall not soon forget the uneasiness with which it was written, the anxiety of never knowing whether all the time and energy I spent writing it was worth the trouble, or whether it was truly a good book. For I had done something I had not tried before. I had not used Benevolent Life to allow my characters freedom. And without it they not only survived, but they prevailed. That was an extraordinary breakthrough for me as a writer. It meant that I had complete faith in my own power to create fictional life; I no longer needed Benevolent Life to help me.

[2] *Black World* (formerly *Negro Digest*), Aug. 1967: 93. Used by permission of publisher.

PERFECT AND IMPERFECT PICTURES

Ah, but when I grow weary of the hard work of novels, I turn to my little friend, Jahdu, a fictional character of mine who has absolute power in his world, and who has magic. Jahdu is free to play tricks, to roam, to do good or be bad. He can turn grass green; he created the tide. He puts things to sleep and wakes them up. He is that stuff from which our folk myths are made and for me a relief, a rest for my mind in his world of mischief and magic. So I have written new Jahdu tales, which will be out in the spring. Then, another hard novel and on and on with more books.

I hope someday something I write will match the perfect pictures I hold in my head. I judge myself and other writers and books on how unique is their failure to do the impossible, to match the perfect pictures from which all writers write and all books are made. This is what literature and writing mean to me: the book, not always a perfect success but, with luck, a worthy failure; the writer, not trying to be better than past authors or her contemporaries particularly, but always attempting to be better than herself.

That for me is happiness.

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Afterword: The Author Speaks

Thanks to the Joint Liaison Committee of the Association for Childhood Education International and The Children's Book Council, three groups of teachers, librarians, administrators, authors, editors and publishers have recently had the privilege of meeting and hearing authors speak.

Many writers, well known for their books, are seldom presented live to listening audiences. To many young readers, authors are old, queer, unreal and, in today's juvenile language, "not with it"—even if these youngsters have read and enjoyed any number of books. Getting acquainted with an author not only as a reader does, but as a seeing, listening member of his or her audience, can make that writer's works come truly alive.

This was my privilege at the joint meeting of these two organizations in November, 1972, in Nashville, Tennessee. As I listened to Virginia Hamilton speak I became increasingly grateful to those who dreamed up this wonderful idea. But I kept wishing that thousands of young readers, too, had been in this audience to see Ms. Hamilton relaxed and at ease as if in a living room, and to hear her tell the story of her life. I was already acquainted with Virginia Hamilton as an author when I met her as a speaker at this joint session. Her ease, warmth and great personal charm are qualities one hopes for in professional speakers and lecturers, but does not necessarily expect of writers. She is fortunately gifted in both arts.

In a direct simple style she told of her early years, family incidents, first efforts at making a living and then the steps in becoming a writer. Every now and then she sprinkled in a touch of humor. There were no harsh words or flashy phrases, no frayed tones. All, like her writing, was underplayed and in a low key. She said of herself that she was not given to rousing people and stirring their anxieties. This was evident. Yet everyone in the large audience welcomed every word.

Today's youngsters need to be exposed to more personalities with charm, warmth, honesty and knowledge and the ability to convey these qualities in an audience situation. The three joint sessions that the Association for Childhood Education International and The Children's Book Council have sponsored have proved to be professional highlights for all privileged to attend.

Roma Gans, Professor Emeritus
Teachers College, Columbia University

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